

Burbank Leader

Burbank Adult School: 'Commitment to what we do'

By Christopher Cadelago

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WEST BURBANK — The Burbank Adult School, which for more than 80 years has served as the city's facilitator of second chances and comeback stories, graduated the largest class in its history this week.

For many of the 88 adult students who received their high school diplomas at a graduation ceremony Wednesday, the Great Recession was exactly the type of catalyst needed to thrust them back into an educational environment, they said.

Sprinkled among the crowd of graduates were budding commercial builders, medical professionals and cable technicians, many of whom planned to pursue two- and four-year college degrees along the way. There were empty nesters, teen mothers and fathers and a woman planning her daughter's graduation from Burroughs High School.

And, in addition to the nearly 90 students earning high school credentials, dozens of others received GEDs and eighth-grade diplomas. The record number of graduates, administrators said, spoke plainly to the continuing need for adult education.

"Also I think that with the state of education being what it is, the difficult reality is people are beginning to realize that by putting off their education, we may not be around in a couple of years because of budget cuts," said Principal Joseph Stark.

Adult schools across the state serve roughly 1.8 million students, though more than 5 million lack a high school diploma or GED, district officials said. Despite the increasing need, lawmakers last year slashed adult education spending by 20%, and another 5% the year ending July 1.

Burbank Adult School has not been immune. The district board of education recently voted to transferred about \$1 million in adult school reserves into other accounts, forcing the institution to operate within a smaller budget.

State cutbacks have also led to program and course reductions, and a greater emphasis on the school's core missions, issuing high school diplomas, career and technical education, parent education and English as a Second Language, Stark said.

"We don't anticipate at this time more cuts, but there's a lot that can happen between now and when the final budget comes out," he said. "Locally though, we feel that there's a commitment to what we do."

That commitment manifested itself in the faces of graduates like Jonathan Shordon, 23 and Laura James, 45.

Shordon had trouble focusing throughout elementary and middle school. He found himself daydreaming about life as a popular rich kid. Then things took a turn for the worst.

"I started to hang out with some bad people and do some bad things," he said.

Thinking back, there was nothing to be proud of.

"That was, until an angel on earth gave me the ultimatum that I needed to hear, which was basically, 'Do something with your life our hit the road,'" he said. "At that moment, the look in my mother's eyes showed me that she really cared about where I was going to end up in life...To come back and graduate after all these years, I feel good. I feel great.

Laura James said she didn't complete high school because her parents were splitting up and she wanted more independence. James enlisted as a reservist in the U.S. Army, later enrolling at Fullerton College while working part time at a pharmaceutical company in Orange County.

"Because I was involved in performing for school musicals when I was younger, and writing and performing for an independent theater company, my connections helped to establish a career in the film industry," said James, among the Class of 2010's honor recipients.

James became a professional stuntwoman and actress. Also the owner of a small supplement business, James completed home-study courses for certification in nutrition and weight management.

But there was a roadblock: In order to receive state credentials as a registered nutritionist, she

needed a diploma, or GED, to attend classes at a local college.

“As the economy declined, so did my work,” James said. “That was when I had the time to find the Burbank Adult School.”

She enrolled, completed classes for her GED, and then earned her high school diploma. Her daughters, one a freshman and the other a senior at John Burroughs High School, looked on from audience.

The eldest was scheduled to get her diploma from Burroughs on Thursday.

“Tonight, I am receiving my diploma right here at the Burbank Adult School,” she said. “And I am very, very proud to receive it.”